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ABSTRACT

The act of composition is based on perception, selection, and arrangement in time and space of what is seen. How the world is seen depends on experience, memory, sensibility, discriminative powers, sexual identity, and cultural and historical contexts. Students can learn to understand how their personality affects what they see by maintaining private journals in which they learn to observe accurately, measure their perceptions, develop self-awareness, and build a bank of experiences from the natural data inherent in their lives. Visual literacy can improve verbal literacy and fluency; students can focus on an image in a slide or photograph, write about what they see, and in this way discover how reality can differ according to the perceiver and how choices can be made about what is seen and how it is seen. The teacher of writing and literature can use visual stimuli to heighten creative potential in students and revitalize the study of language and literature. (SRT)

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EYE to I: Influences of the Psychology of Perception in the Act of Composition.

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"The world must be measured by EYE"

--Wallace Stevens

SELECTIVE PERCEPTION

The basic act of composition is based on perception, selection and arrangement in time and space. Annie Dillard, in her Pulitzer prize winning collection of essays, PILGRIM AT TINKER CREEK, describes the process, that distinguishes looking from seeing, as hearing is distinct from listening:

> The difference between the two ways of seeing is the difference between walking with and without a camera. I walk from shot to shot, reading the light on a calibrated meter. When I walk without a camera, my own shutter opens and the moment's light prints on my silver gut.

Students of composition can train themselves to be the transcribers or taperecorders of their experience, as they can become cameras with silver guts. How we record is dependent not only on the eye, but on our I: how we see the world filtered through our experience, memory, sensibility, discriminative powers, sexual identity, cultural and historical contexts. As Thoreau so aptly phrased it, The question is not what you look at, but what you see." Students of composition can learn to distinguish between between what they think they see and what there is to see, for Thoreau continues, "You can't say more than you see." Each sees differently. Susan Sontag states, "In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe." Ralph Waldo Emerson tells us, "Every object rightly seen unlocks a new faculty of the soul."

But what if you know perfectly well what you see, and yet know the tale about the "blind men and the elephant" or another version of "the eye of the beholder" premise, as found in Camera Arts magazine:

> Some years ago, a builder, an architect and a banker were watching an impressive new building being erected. The builder said, 'I think of the incredible coordination of mind and matter that it takes to bring this into being.' The architect said, 'I think of the contribution to aesthetics and culture that this structure will bring about.' The banker said nothing, but when asked to reveal his thoughts, he replied, 'I think of women'. The architect and the builder were surprised at this answer, and asked why. The banker said, 'Because I always think of women.'

Piaget's concept of assimilation explains the banker's response, as it does the others, and oftentimes, your students', in that each makes the text more meaningful, according to what he thinks, knows, feels or is preoccupied with, which changes the act of seeing into one of perceiving, because it involves the personality of the respondent. Linda Flower cautions, in her research on composing styles, that we must transcend this personal stage and concern ourselves with issues.

The critic, John Ruskin emphasized the effects of intellectual prejudice which could prevent him from recording what he really saw, as opposed to what he expected to see. The"I" or EGO can erect a barrier between the conscious and the unconscious. The world of dream fascinates us, as it did Jung and predating him, Mark Twain. Students of composition find it valuable to explore and interpret their dreams. As an assignment, the recording of dreams leads to analysis of imagery, of fragments of experiences, of repetitions, and of relationship to the conscious world, and is a valuable aid in exploring unconscious wishes, fears and understanding, that may threaten the psyche or may be censored in the waking world. It is valuable in considering cinematic technique and the stream of consciousness in contemporary literature. It connects the waking and dream life in a viable way that is integrative to the waking personality. It untaps the imaginative impulses generated during sleep. In abstracting content to "make it our own", Piaget points out the "whole" person comes into play.

The writer, the photographer and the teacher/student of composition not only describe a landscape; they ask us to imagine it, by suggestion as well as statement. Exclusion, as well as inclusion, assures that any composition will be more than an inventory of details, This encourages holistic assessment. J.J. Gibson reminds us that we "expect", therefore, we "imagine", and therefore, we are responsible for what we come to know. We pay more attention to what agrees with our current emotion or mood. Emotions are selective filters, letting in signals of one wavelength and filtering

out others. (slide) George H. Bower's studies at Stanford illustrate clearly that attention is selective, that cognition often yields to unconscious demands Our feelings can be magnets, in attracting what can be used. (slide)

In order for students to appreciate this spectrum of influences, I ask them to maintain journals with successful results. They record at least three entries a week. They learn to observe accurately, to measure their perceptions, to change habits, and to develop the necessary awareness of themselves as the best natural resources, for building a bank of experiences from the natural data inherent in their lives, for future essays. Among these entries will number ones on an assigned nature walk; a first experience of death of a loved one; a significant relationship; feelings of happiness, of sadness, of achievement or of loss; an interpretation of a dream; a childhood memory; description of a relative (father, mother, sister, brother); an inventory of aspirations; a memorable trip; the experience of a film, book, play or concert; a visit to an art exhibition or dance concert; and a projection of where they want to be in ten years. The goal is development of greater self-awareness, ability to record data; avoidance of "habit"; and a willingness to clarify feelings and impressions to themselves before communicating them to others. The "private" nature of the journal is stressed, as opposed to the "public" nature of essay writing.

Revision is integral to the writing process. It is necessary to stress the act of revision, as one of re-seeing. Jerome Bruner emphasizes that we learn three basic ways: (1) on the muscle (motoric); (2) by the image (iconic); and (3) by restatement in words (symbolic). Khătena's research shows that multiple sense modalities produce more original visual images. Minor White, the photographer, when he taught photography, emphasized "seeing" with the heart, the head and the body. Students of composition need to employ each mode, or the modes in sequence, in order to re-see, and, consequently, rethink their experience. (slide) They need to restructure their experiences, given a new perception.

Visual literacy can improve verbal literacy and fluency. Fox Talbot called the camera, "the pencil of nature". Seeing is an articulation or verbalization whether in the photograph or the paragraph. Benjamin Lee Whorf has illustrated that language classifies and orders objects and experiences and abstracts from physical reality in order to structure it. Discrepancies in particular students' perceptions encourage them to sharpen their vision, to consider what the data means, and to consider the discrepancies of their perception. When a student sees clearly, he communicates with greater accuracy. "A red wheelbarrow" is never the same after reading William Carlos Williams's poem. Robert Frost has changed how we see birches and mending fences. Edward Weston and Ansel Adam's photographs of seashells, of a moon over Taos and Yosemite, show us what Edward Weston tells us our own unseeing eyes might have missed.

To find new ways to look at the familiar objects around us is a goal of the poet and the photographer. Eva Rubenstein, the photographer and late composer's daughter, encourages her students to talk about their pictures; she marvels that what students see has little to do with what is visible in the picture. The teacher of composition can assign his/her students visits to photo art exhibitions to report on selected photographs; to find old photographs in photo albums; to take their own photos(perhaps, in period costume) and to discuss the formal elements; to locate photographs in newspapers, in current magazines and ads, and in each instance, learn through the discipline of focussing on the image to discover a choice of words. These exercises enable students to discover how much "reality" differs with the perceiver; how choices can be made about what we see and how we see. Simultaneous perceptions can awaken new dimensions of viewing. Students learn to "read" visual images and to "write" them. Contemplation, comparison and contrast, and linkage to memory and the viewer's reality are all possibilities . Susan Sontag points out, "Photographs which cannot themselves explain any thing, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy."

IMAGE AND IDEA

Horace, in The Art of Poetry, reminds the teacher of composition and literature that "The mind is more slowly stirred by the ear than the eye." Stimulation through multiple modes has proven to be most effective. As a result, possibilities for interdisciplinary work are endless. In a joint session with a music theory class, students can compose music from viewing slides and hearing poems. Music can be added to slide presentations to evoke both sound and sight responses. Students in a science curriculum can use documentary photographs from a field trip, microscopic photography from laboratories, laser prints, or computer pictures a springboards for imaginative expression.

The teacher of composition can use slides to train and improve perception. The stills allow for time to focus and concentrate on images. The students free associate and experience multiple responses to similar information. Naming pictures produces a contextual or episodic memory that can be accessed readily, by finding a correspondence, in memory, through a visual presentation of the picture name. (Tulving, 1972) Names are multiples in memory, a given name occurring in different ensembles. The names of common objects are stored in relatively small memory ensembles while those of rare objects are stored in large ensembles. Pronouncing familiar words can produce persistent changes in perception and/or memory as the speed changes with which the words are recognized. i.e. cat vs. platypus;pear vs. kiwi fruit. According to Oldfield's hypothesis, response retrieval processes are dependent on some perceptual judgment about the familiarity or the frequency of encounter of the depicted objects. There is disagreement about whether the idea of a chair is a common abstraction in memory or two separate representations - one verbal, and the other, an image. Knowledge of the category of an object is associated with an abstract idea of the object (function) rather than directly with its name or appearance (description, maker). e.g. Windsor; caned; all chairs. The teacher of composition can talk about classification systems, and stereotyping, cliches, and euphenisms, etc. in this context.

William Carlos Williams wrote:

> "Sometimes I'll be driving home, and I'll see the people I've met that day in my mind's eye as clear as can be. When I write my poems, I'll try to hand over what I've see to others though words. If I were a photographer, I'd send out pictures."

Most students are already familiar with the idea of a picture of a person drawn through words, but William Carlos William's statement clarifies it.

The poet, Denise Levertov, in her essay, "Looking at Photographs" in THE POET AND THE WORLD, uses the approach of the writer as Seer, as performing the function of "Make-See" for the reader, though the eye, as optic center and the inner eye, as emotional center. She maintains that photographs teach the poet to see better or renew his way of seeing. She looks at fine photographs to help herself discover the next steps in a poem she is writing. She may even write poems about the content of the photographs, or about a memory that the photograph elicits. Her example is a useful one for the teacher of writing.

Seeing requires training, as does reading. Repetition is necessary because verbal images and messages are vulnerable to random interference or to noise. We focus on what we regard to be significant in our field of vision. If we shift our vantage point, we lose the previous perception; it recedes in memory.

Computers extend the range of our senses and enlarge our supply of concepts. As Kant says, "Intuitions are empty without concepts". If a poem appears on a screen or grid, like a picture, it is more or less visible to anyone who does not read it at the right speed. The poem will become many poems depending on how long the reader dwells on the words. It can be reread, Dr. Schank points out, but an attempt to return leaves the reader with a different version. Time lapse photography speeds up changes, and permits us to respond perceptually to rhythms and patterns, such as in plant growth, or magnolia buds opening. (Slides) It is worth noting that children with eidetic vision lose their after-images, when language competency is gained. It displaces the capacity for recall of pictures.

CONCLUSION

Teachers of composition and literature need to consider the influence of past experiences, of expectations (often regional or cultural or Ethnic), of selective attention, as well as the degree of "preoccupation", not to speak of variations in the adjustment of the perceptual system to changing conditions, in the process of composition.

Selection is a key, as is arrangement in time and space to structuring the world. Maps give us selective information about the physical world. Pictures, like mirrors, convey an aspect of that world as it varies with the conditions of light. The caption of a picture informs us, but it also restricts us, in our impressions. An illustration or a picture accompanying a paragraph is not the same as translating a picture into a paragraph or vice versa, wherein each shares in the functions of the other. We continuously invent and reinvent the world through verbal accounts which interpret, analyze and structure the world for us, a process of synthesis, rather than accumulation.

Cognitive development is strongly related to emotional growth and involves both conscious and unconscious processes. Both written accounts and pictures may be linguistically multivalent. Both symbols, pictures and words, are subject to a hierarchy of responses, which include: identification, recognition, recall, assessment, selection, composition, and dream or fantasization. The teacher of writing and literature, aware of these possibilities, can encourage functioning in more than one, simultaneously or concurrently. Such an approach heightens creative potential in individuals and revitalizes a study of language and literature. We learn to use the "pencil of nature" in verbal and visual terms.

One of our finest translators and contemporary poets, a Pulitzer Prize winner, W.S. Merwin, says:

> What you are given to remember
> Has been saved before you from death's dullness by
> Remembering. The unique intention
> Of a language whose speech has died is order
> Incomplete only where someone has forgotten.
> You will find that order helps you to remember.
> What you come to remember becomes yourself.
> --A Dead Language

Mark Strand, poet, teacher and translator, sees his poems as comprising the "stories of our lives". Paul Strand, photographer, says, "Your photography is a record of your living for anyone who really sees." From Ralph Waldo Emerson's "transparent eyeball" to the assertive "I" of modern psychology, an intimate understanding of our perception, an enrichment of our perceptual capacities and thus, of our linguistic competency, enhances the whole human personality and builds the character of modern man and the world. This is not only the revitalization of the tradition of literature, but the recreation of the myths and symbols of man, without which the civilization of human beings such as we know it, would cease to exist.